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23 March 1953

THE MILITARY SITUATION IN INDOCHINA

As a background for the present military situation, I think it would be useful to consider the development of the Viet Minh forces opposing the French and Viet Namese in Indochina.

Until the fall of 1950 the war was largely guerrilla action against French outposts throughout the length of Indochina. In September 1950 the Viet Minh forces launched concerted attacks and overran several French outposts in Tonkin, forcing the French to withdraw their forces into the Tonkin Delta. In early 1951 Viet Minh forces were reorganized into divisional sized units indicating their development from a guerrilla force into large organized units. In late 1951 Viet Minh forces again launched sustained attacks against remaining French outposts and the Delta. These attacks so severely threatened the French position in Tonkin that a direct outcome was the decision to send US aid. General de Lattre also assumed command at this time.

During 1952 the French retained relative freedom of overland movement in the area west of the Red River. The Viet Minh concentrated their forces east of the Red River and north of the Delta. An additional two divisions were located in southeastern Tonkin just outside the French perimeter.

The French were unable to establish the direction in which the Viet Minh would attack last fall although the area from which the attacks would be launched and the approximate timing were generally accurate. The attack began in early October. Instead of launching a frontal attack on

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the Delta, the Viet Minh forces drove westward across the Red River and sent some forces southward to cut off supply routes between the Delta and French outposts in Na San and Lai Chau. This isolated two substantial segments of French forces, forcing them to rely on air resupply. These forces were grouped around two airfields but at one time during the operations, the group at Na San had to rely on air drops because the landing field was subjected to enemy mortar fire. The French used more than 100 C-47 transports and were able to bring in sufficient supplies and reinforcements to keep the two garrisons from being overrun.

While the Viet Minh contained the isolated French forces, they also advanced west and south and overran a small French garrison at Dien Bien Phu just a few miles from the border of Laos. Small Viet Minh elements pursued the retreating French forces into northern Laos.

The French forces in the Delta launched an attack along the east side of the Red River against Viet Minh supply routes and supply installations. They succeeded in overrunning and capturing one large supply dump of about 300 tons and then withdrew into the Delta.

The French had been supporting Miao tribesmen around Laokay, but when their overland route along the river was cut ^{by the} ~~both~~ Viet Minh advance, supply and liaison difficulties increased. A Viet Minh force supported by about ten battalions of Chinese troops who crossed the border from Yunnan attacked the Miao guerrillas and forced them to disperse. The Chinese forces subsequently returned to Yunnan.

During this campaign two remaining Viet Minh divisions had successfully infiltrated the southern border of the Delta and had forced the diversion

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of French forces from the Hanoi area. The Viet Minh forces were then forced to withdraw and have since been resting and refitting in south-east Tonkin near the Delta perimeter. There are at present an estimated 40,000 Viet Minh regular and regional troops within the Delta.

The Viet Minh offensive spent itself during December probably because of a combination of heavy losses, lack of logistical support in their extended position and the onset of the rainy season which substantially reduced combat activities.

During the past approximately three-month period, the other Viet Minh divisions have been resting and refitting northwest of the Delta and now appear ready to renew the offensive. The direction of attack is again problematic but reconnaissance activities suggest that at least part of the forces will attack in the direction of the French garrisons at Sam Neua about 30 miles inside Laos.

The movement of Viet Minh forces into Laos would be more in the nature of a logistical exercise than a hard fought campaign. The strategic value of northern Laos to the Viet Minh is questionable. It is extremely mountainous, undeveloped country and is of doubtful value except from the standpoint of further restricting French influence outside the Delta. By launching a strong attack against Sam Neua the Viet Minh could achieve a "cheap victory" as a morale boost for the troops and utilize such a victory for propaganda purposes. Only three French battalions now garrison Sam Neua and they could not

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hold in the face of a concentrated attack. The weather is suitable for military operations during the next four to six weeks after which the rainy season sets in and sharply restricts military activities.

In any future attacks, as has been the case in the past, logistical problems will significantly limit Viet Minh operations. The French-held Delta comprises most of the rice producing area in Tonkin and consequently the Viet Minh have been forced to launch rice offensives into the Delta each summer. Small units infiltrate the Delta after the rice had been collected and carry away as much as they can with the help of coolie labor. The Viet Minh have established small mobile plants in Tonkin to manufacture hand grenades, and some small arms but the majority of such equipment must be obtained in Communist China. In early 1952 Chinese aid was estimated to have reached more than 1,000 tons per month. These supplies included such items as mortar and artillery ammunition, TNT, gasoline, shoes, clothing, cotton and medicine supplies. More recently the rate of flow of such supplies has approximated 500-700-tons per month. These supplies can be moved by motor truck to near the Red River and beyond that much of the transport is by coolie labor. There have been reports that as many as 20,000 coolies were employed during the campaign last fall. These limiting logistic capabilities will, therefore, hinder any extensive military campaign into Laos and will also restrict the size of the garrisons that can be maintained there after the French forces are driven out. Some supplies can now be moved down routes along the Red River but the area of Yunnan adjacent to the norther border of Tonkin is not a useful source for the kind of supplies which are required

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